

Residents organize new education foundation for school district

By Steve Marcotte

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Officials announced this week that a new education foundation will support the Ashburnham-Westminster School District.

The nonprofit organization, which was made possible through the efforts of several residents in two member towns, could provide grants to teachers and schools for the purpose of “supplementing innovative ideas, curriculum materials, professional development programs, attendance at conferences” or in other forms to improve student learning, according to a mission statement.

“I think it’s a great idea,” School Committee Chairman David Christianson said Wednesday. “I’m thrilled. It’s a real bright spot given everything else that’s going on.”

School officials, who have struggled to deal with financial constraints, said the foundation can complement the district.

“It’s something that is apart from the district from a legal standpoint,” Mr. Christianson.

He recalled Superintendent Michael Zapantis mentioning the idea of creating a foundation when he arrived in the district in 2003.

“It’s something that he’s talked about on and off over the course of the last four or five years,” Mr. Christianson said.

Dr. Zapantis said the foundation will raise funds as part of an endowment plan over a long period of time to supplement programming.

“I was able to identify, with the school committee’s help, several members in each community ... that might have some interest in participating on a Board of Directors for the foundation.”

Members of the foundation notified the school committee of the organization Tuesday.

Ron Hurd, one of the founding members, said he was approached about the idea by Dr. Zapantis. “I readily volunteered. ... It’s certainly a very important cause these days,” Mr. Hurd said.

Fellow foundation member Jen Shenk said one of the reasons she decided to join was because of a need to fund programs previously available to students.

“I feel like it’s a great opportunity to bring in programs that promote academic excellence,” she said.

“The more I talk to local parents, the more I realize I’m not in this boat by myself.”

The group is modeling the foundation after dozens of others throughout Massachusetts, Ms. Shenk said.

“I think it’s very exciting,” she added.

The foundation will have between five to 20 people on its Board of Directors. Dr. Zapantis and Mr. Christianson are also expected to remain involved as district resources to the foundation.

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